The Beast from Within

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The Beast from Within

by accideadly

Summary

Jack wanted to be home, Jack needed to be home.

But he was as far away as he could possibly be and all he wanted was to save them all. Save them from this wretched island on which they had crashed.

The Beast had shown itself to Will Graham, and Jack wondered how much longer he could hold on before he would have to let him go.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Jack Crawford was well-built; tall for his age and with the muscles to show it. His mother wanted him to become a police officer, his father wanted him to become a boxer. Now on this strange little island, all he wanted was to sit on the couch and see them smile again.

He remembered a burning blaze as they had fallen. An inky black sky then; highlighting every flame. Why must he remember the screams? Screams, then nothing until he woke up with the sun blazing upon him and a boy poking him anxiously.

The younger boy stumbled behind him as they waded through the brush. Frederick Chilton; a lean, awkward boy who seemed worried to make any decision lest Jack disagree. Frederick had been clutching to a large conch he had found like if it were life support for minutes now. Perhaps in any other circumstance, the boy would have been annoying. But he was just glad he was not alone.

Not that he would admit he felt scared.

This place was wrong. It was so beautiful, so perfect. The fauna too large, too vivid. The long and plump bodies of the flittering birds misshapen. Alien insects buzzed in queer melodies always just out of beat. They made it to a clearing, the jungle behind them and the sea before them; an impasse.

“Jack... Jack. Don’t you think we should use the conch? Blow it like here, like a signal?” Frederick asked. “Isn’t it good to see who else is out here?”

Jack was not so sure; his parents taught him well that strangers weren’t always to be trusted. And what use was a shell anyway? But maybe Frederick was right; more people meant a better plan. They could figure out how to get out of here, or at least survive until their parents found them.

Because their parents would find them.

Spindly hands held the shell out; expectant of Jack’s next move. Jack took it; weighty and right in his palms. As he moved it to his lips, his eyes lingered on Frederick with slight uncertainty.

“You sort of have to spit, blow from here,” Frederick guided, placing a hand on his own diaphragm.

A harsh note boomed out, echoing off the trees. Audible for miles. Frederick’s gaze began wandering; willing others into existence. Closing his eyes, Jack focused on nothing but playing the conch. As his confidence grew, octaves wavered; louder and more pronounced. He only stopped when he had no breath left.

At first, he expected nothing; open eyes to reveal that it was only the two of them. But as he did, little figures approached from all across the sand.

The sun wore them down quickly. In the shaded clearing, they found a meeting place; stumps and discarded logs used as makeshift chairs to form an imperfect circle around which all the boys sat. Perhaps there were others; who had heard the calls and elected to ignore them. Jack only had time to worry about those before him.

The rabble had all introduced themselves; boys of different ages and builds and worlds. The one unifying thing: they were all here. All plane-wrecked. Lost.

Some of the younger boys couldn't understand the severity; failed to realize there was no fixing the plane or making a boat from sticks and sailing out as you might on a Sunday afternoon by the lake. But he didn't say anything. No one did. If that eased them, then he would let the peaceful ignorance dance in their little brains.

Jack, Hannibal Lecter: a tall boy with sharp eyes and sharper cheekbones, and Will Graham: a boy too-skinny and with hair needing a good comb, were the only three not seated. While Jack and Hannibal stood in the center, Will had left himself outside of it. Watching as slowly the small individual conversations faltered and eyes turned to them, Hannibal spoke first.

"We need a leader. I am the leader of the choir," his eyes moved to regard the boys all wearing matching attire as him. "Therefore, it should be me."

Jack's fingers tightened around the conch; he didn't want to argue. They were all boys; they were all children. But he was the oldest of all his cousins, the one to decide the games they played, where to explore on a Saturday afternoon. This wasn't a game though, was it?

"I think it should be Jack, he is the one who got us all together," Frederick chimed in.

Despite his feeble words, murmurs of agreement followed. Jack looked strong and was often mistaken for older than he was. He was only sixteen. Even if he had started to look like a man, he didn't feel it.

"Well, if that is the case. There should be a vote," Will, who had only spoken thus far to say his name, suggested. Despite his eyes remaining fixed upon the dirt, there was an assuredness in his words. Jack could see a slight smile forming on his face; it was entirely undecipherable. It was obvious the boy considered himself different; holding himself as if he had less right to speak, *to be*. It made Jack wanted to hug him, to tell him that his voice was as worthy as anyone else's; it was what his mother would do.

As they raised their hands to vote, Jack ignored the sallow sourness that washed over Hannibal. Only the choir raised their hands for Hannibal; the rest went to Jack. He was surprised when Hannibal dutifully took his hand in a cordial shake. Still, the annoyance in the boy's maroon eyes was plain to see.

"Hannibal, you are, of course, still in charge of the choir – they can... Well, what do you want them to be?" Jack asked sincerely; the last thing he wanted was to step on anyone's toes.

"Hunters."

“Hunters, it is then!”

Jack, Hannibal, and Will were chosen to explore the island for resources. Well, Jack had chosen Will, and Hannibal had chosen to invite himself. Frederick had tried too, but Jack had said he should stay and count the group’s numbers. He didn’t want the boy to linger on him while he was with the others.

At best, Will seemed uninterested. At worst, Hannibal seemed deadly now brandishing a pocketknife. Jack did not want to ask why Hannibal had such a thing.

Hunter, indeed.

As if explorers of a foreign land, and not frightened boys far from home, they found the cliff edge. The secret hope that Jack had clung to washed away like waves across jagged rocks. For miles and miles in all directions; nothing, but the undeniable vastness of the ocean.

“We are alone here,” And as Jack said it, he couldn’t tell whether there was relief or fear in his revelation.

“This is all there is,” Hannibal surmised. “If we continue up the mountain, we can look for water, food, somewhere to sleep.”

“Jack, Hannibal,” Will called quietly, waiting for them both to fall to his side and see his pointed hand. “Animal tracks. Heading that way.”

The thickness of the air was getting to him, he was sure of it, but something about Hannibal – and Will, too – seemed off. They spoke too much like adults, or boys desperate to be adults. Were they not scared just as he was? Then again, maybe it was all they could do to cope with the uncertainty of this wretched place. It was beautiful and Jack felt like he could stay here forever; he needed to leave quickly lest that feeling win out.

He followed behind as they plunged into the brush; Will was most skilled at this. A high squeal drew Jack’s head from the back of perfectly-neat, dirty-blond hair. Some little animal had found itself caught amongst the brambles.

A piglet. The runt. A tiny little thing that Jack might have picked up and cuddled at his uncle’s farm.

A defenseless child.

The blade in Hannibal’s hand rose high; Jack’s breath caught. He said nothing. And then as if time had stopped for everyone but the little brown thing, it freed itself. Tiny legs running

until it became imperceivable from the overgrowth.

“I was trying to figure out where best to stab it,” Hannibal argued to no contender. “You have to slit the throat and drain it.”

“Well, why didn’t you then?” Will questioned lightly.

“I was going to, but it ran away before I got a chance. Next time I won’t be so slow.”

Will scoffed, a slightly pained sound that Jack could not decipher.

Jack believed every word Hannibal said.

Wide young eyes stared at the trio; taking in every word as if it were gospel. The role of leader was taken much more seriously than Jack had anticipated. With every word, their nerves and fears seemed to draw them closer, clinging to their leader and his companions as if they were somehow anymore equipped to save them.

They had decided the conch should be held when someone wanted to speak – lest they all continue shouting over each other. It was in Jack’s hands now.

“We should build a fire on the mountain. To signal to planes and ships we are here,” Jack suggested. “Our parents, our families will start looking for us. It will make it much easier if we give them a sign.”

Many of the boys cheered and whooped in agreeance. Suddenly their nerves lifting; for all but one. Frederick eyed Jack until he hesitantly passed the conch over.

“But, what if no one is looking for us? Nobody knows we are here,” Frederick’s voice lacked conviction, he continued nonetheless. “They know where we *were going*, not where we have ended up. We could be here a long time.”

There was a quick silence; the young boys' joy stolen away so quickly. Frederick chewed nervously at his thumbnail and refused to move his eyes from Jack’s. Slowly, he held out his palm until Frederick returned the shell to him.

“That is a... fair concern, but when you see what I – *We* saw, you’ll know this is a good island.”

Hannibal smiled warmly at him; Jack quickly passed over the conch.

“Jack is right; there is water for bathing, pigs for food, and fruit too. However long we are here, we will not go without,” Hannibal spoke with a conviction that eased even Jack of his worries. “Does anyone else have anything they consider important to say?”

Hannibal set down the conch in the middle of the circle; anyone’s to take.

Wary whispers grew, then rowdy murmurs, then a round-faced boy with cherry cheeks and thick black hair was forced towards the shell. As he picked it up, his fingers twitched tentatively; worried his touch alone might break it.

“I - uh -,” His eyes fell to the boys behind, whom all nodded earnestly. “In the woods, I saw something like a snake but larger, a... beastie.”

It was so plain that many of the older boys found it funny, but Jack could feel the color draining from his face. *Probably just a nightmare*. Eyes drew wilder as he remembered. Sweat pooled across his pale forehead, more earnestly than just the island’s intense heat would facilitate. *Just a nightmare*.

Hannibal laughed quietly; undeniable ridicule.

“Tell us what it looked like, - hmm, what is your name?” he said, little effort to hide his amusement.

“It is Franklyn, F-Froideveaux... And It was a big snake – Giant! But – But, it was dark, I couldn’t see so well.”

“If it was dark, how did you see it?” The question came from Will. Its tone was genuine; no intent of mocking, but that did little to stop how it wounded the boy.

Franklyn placed down the shell and returned to his peers; downtrodden. As he looked at the little huddle, Jack felt sick. They were children, all of them – but he was one of the oldest and it was his duty to do what he had been elected to do.

He strode to the middle and grasped the conch between his fingers. Around him, dozens of boys stared; terror, excitement, indifference.

“Shall we get to making this fire then? If we collect wood in groups, we will all be safe.”

On the mountaintop, the fire had begun burning – a marvel of high-stacked logs. Jack had done nothing to stop as Hannibal had pulled the spectacles from Frederick’s face and used them to start it. Now Frederick clung to the conch even more fervently – it allowed him to talk, it allowed him to be listened to. He skulked next to Jack, who was admiring the beautiful thing they had created.

“You’ve wasted all the wood,” Quiet, but not quiet enough. “Who’s going to see the smoke at night anyway?”

“It’s a good fire; it should keep us warm,” Jack said, humbly as he could manage.

“Good *for now*. See if it lasts an hour.”

“You are one to talk, Frederick. What have you done for us?” Hannibal joined.

“I have the conch. I’m allowed to speak now,” Frederick pulled into himself, holding the conch closer.

“You carried a shell up the mountain and expect me to listen to your concerns. At least everyone else helped.”

“I have the conch! I am allowed to speak. All of you rushed off so quickly and never considered the consequences of dumping down all the wood at once. Look at it now.”

“Why didn’t you say anything then? If you are such an expert... I did not see you trying to aid us.”

“I did say...” Frederick countered meekly.

Another voice chimed in, “And we did use his glasses to start it,” Will scratched his head before turning away. Avoiding the discontent on Hannibal’s face or the guilt on Jack’s. Because Jack knew Frederick was right; he had told them not to rush off as they had clambered up the mountain. And no one had listened.

“I did say and no one listened even though I had the conch right in my hands. Just like now!” Frederick reiterated.

“The conch doesn’t count on the mountain,” Hannibal stated as if it were a rule so obvious it needn’t be discussed. “We need to stick to the rules, we are all honorable men, this is ridiculous. Jack is the leader, and you just won’t be quiet and let him work.”

Jack felt a pang of pride; like he was doing the right thing and that the others could see that too. Frederick’s arms were limp in their fight against Hannibal as he took the conch from him.

“Jack, I can split the choir into groups, let this fire burn, and then get to making a better one. Then,” His hands extended the conch towards Jack. “What is next, *leader* ?”

They began discussing lookouts, forts, all manner of things which Jack felt entirely unqualified to speak on. Alas, the few *willing* to take charge continued. Frederick was quiet for a while; his eyes fixed upon the blaze. Suddenly recharged, he leaped up and took the conch into his grip.

“Look at what you’ve done. There is your *good fire* .”

All the boys turned then; watched the fire cascade as it captured the first tree in its wrath. The dark trees came alive. Cracking and screaming, crumpling and writhing as the flames took hold. For what must have been half a mile, Jack watched them roll from tree to tree. Dry, spindly twigs quickly alighted. There was nothing anyone could do but watch. Watch and witness the death of the trees.

“We could have made a camp down there; stayed safe,” Frederick spat. "Now how do we even know if we’ve still got all the little ones.”

“Frederick, I told *you* to make a list,” Jack barked.

“How was I supposed to keep track? They all ran off as soon as you were gone.” Frederick looked around at all the boys; hopelessly trying to count, then his eyes filled with dread. “And now... Where is he? The little one who told us about the beast.”

Like a bullet, Jack’s eyes searched the crowd; fearful eyes flitting in a vain attempt to locate him. After only a moment, it was clear. Franklyn was gone.

The huts were failing. The huts had been failing for days. Jack felt his jaw tighten as the boys splashed in the waves; only Will bothered to help. How eager they were in meetings, how they all sounded so willing to put the work in, but again; they did nothing but play and eat and mess about. Or *hunt*.

Hannibal was back from *another* unsuccessful hunt. Jack felt his patience wearing thin. It was an unwanted thought but now it was planted, its grip was unavoidable: Were ‘the hunts’ really any more than an elaborate excuse to slack off?

“Don’t you think the hunters could help with the shelters?” Jack tried to keep the tone light, he *tried*. “Only Will and I have done anything; it isn’t easy on our own. I understand the small ones, but what about everyone else?”

“We are *doing something*, Jack. We are hunting. The boys want meat,” Hannibal replied, flatly.

“You haven’t hunted anything yet.”

“We are trying to hunt,” His voice remained the same volume, but Jack could see the way his eyes grew small and the muscles of his face tensed.

“But you aren’t - You haven’t! You have gone out for days and still found nothing.”

“Are you accusing me of something, Jack?”

No, Hannibal, no... I am simply saying Will and I have been working hard and getting nowhere,” He calmed his tone to a hush and leaned closer. “And we *need* shelters, Hannibal. The little ones, you must have seen them. Or heard their cries...”

“They are scared, Jack,” Hannibal’s tone was understanding now.

“They are all scared of the monsters now.”

The two boys did not notice that Will had left them. He preferred it that way; a quiet and unconcerned presence that left little impression. There was no doubt in Will’s mind that they

found him weird. Every school he'd been to was just the same. This was like a school too, except no teachers or lessons or end. Wandering through the brush, he'd been helping the little ones collect fruit. Pushing them up so they could reach the next branch or directing them where to go next, but now he had reached an unfamiliar clearing and no little feet pattered his way.

He continued until the beautiful fauna surrounded him; so bright and vivid and alive. It was unlike anything he ever saw at home. A little grove of bushes called him over; its scarily bright berries a tantalizing sight which would not fool him. He crept between the bushes and sat. No one could see him here, but he could see the whole world.

An elaborate chorus of birdsong projected from all directions; every way he turned a bug or leaf or bloom that he had only ever seen in picture books. It was safe here.

He was safe from everyone. Everyone was safe from him.

The mornings were glorious; perfect warmth hit glowing skin. Little ones ran across pleasant sands, giggling and content. It was a vacation; a summer break with all his friends. Even Jack was more placated; less weary and forlorn about the circumstances in which they found themselves.

The day would wear on. The older boys would grow bored and cruel. Jack wrested the still-failing shelter and watched one of the little ones cry as Clark drove his heel into their sandcastle. *At least it was only a sandcastle*, Jack reassured himself.

Then the afternoon would come; the heat tearing through them endlessly, capturing even the darkest shade in its cruel embrace. The little ones hid away in makeshift huts and slept; slept until they wailed at the nasty dreams which plagued them. With stomachs full of acidic fruits and unfiltered water, the pain would start in the afternoon. Twisting at their insides until late into the day.

The night would come; the terror of the little ones' dreams during the day almost comical in comparison. Endless and soulless. Rustling and creaking and thudding. Noise after noise threatened the boys; most of whom could only manage moments of restless sleep. The big ones would cry then too; hidden amongst the dark and the little ones' sobs. No one ever talked about the nights. No one ever talked about the missing little faces.

Jack no longer counted the days.

His hair has grown unruly; he dreamt of his mother's hands working at his hair in the gentle way only she knew. The state which he had descended to; would his mother even recognize him now?

The day was just like any other until he heard Will shouting. He followed the boy's pointed finger out to sea. A ship. A ship was approaching them. Finally. For a moment, he felt his

mother's fingers braiding his hair again. He felt hope.

Then, like a roaring wave, sickly dread washed over his entire being. His head turned to seek an answer he already knew; the fire was out. The hunters' task had been left incomplete. For his mother's sake, he bit back the curses he wished to scream. And for the little one's too-delicate ears.

Will looked at him blankly, then turned his attentions back to their wavering shelter. They both knew the ship would be long past them before they reached the fire. They both knew. With concerted effort, Jack held back threatening tears. Of sadness or fury, he could not tell.

A humming beat; a song rose from the undergrowth. Everyone turned to find its source. The wildly-painted faces of the hunters peeked through the bushes. Across a long stick, a slain pig tied by its feet.

They were chanting and hollering. Not singing.

Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.

They had a pig instead of their freedom.

Hannibal headed the hunters; the only boy without a painted face. It seemed he needed no disguise to be an animal, a beast. There was a slight smile; righteous and determined and proud. Jack wished to smack the smirk from his face; he daren't move an inch lest he actually do it. Two other figures ran towards the advancing man though. As they approached, Jack watched Hannibal's expression fall.

His victory was being superseded.

"There was a ship," Frederick shouted. "There was a ship, but YOU didn't look after the fire, and now we are dead. We are as good as dead. Because of you."

With no warning, Hannibal shoved him to the ground. Watching with no remorse as one of the lenses of his glasses broke as they hit the floor. Jack ran over then; not wanting this feud to go further. From Hannibal's expression, he knew he could see the fury in Jack's eyes.

"Hannibal," Will was quiet, considered in his words. "There was a ship."

Jack cracked his fingers; looking through Hannibal as he faced him. His jaw was beginning to cramp from how tightly it was locked. Again, he was biting his tongue. The indignation in Hannibal's pupils softened as he looked between the two of them. Behind him, his tribe began murmuring with concern. Realization dawning upon them. There was a ship. Now it was gone.

"Jack... Will, I am sorry, about the fire I mean. We never – I never intended to let it go out."

Perhaps he was just placating him, but Jack felt the words rang true.

“We will make another fire, a better fire.”

He signaled his men; it took them only moments to start up their chanting again.

Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in.

A *better fire* was one that could not exist, a fire that they had needed moments ago. The time for better fire was gone; another ship may never come.

“We’ve all seen it – We all have! So big and mean-looking,” A little one with scruffy hair was trying his best to articulate.

“All of you are having nightmares; that’s all it is,” Jack felt lessened in his convictions by the day.

His eyes wandered to the older boys; Will was walking towards him. The face that Will pulled destroyed the last of his convictions.

“Will, you don’t seriously believe it, do you?”

“There could be something, Jack...” Will spoke quietly, but Jack wished he had been quieter. He knew the gaze of the group had fixed upon them. The boy’s heartbeat was choking him as concern grew in Jack’s eyes. Hannibal and Jack seemed the only ones not to think him insane; that sweet reprise would last no longer.

“Will?” Jack placed a firm, comforting hand on his shoulder and watched as the boy’s grimace only worsened.

“It’s why I want to leave, Jack,” Barely a whisper.

His brows furrowed. He couldn’t understand the boy’s words; he wanted home too, but not because of some imagined monster. He needed home because he belonged there.

“Frederick never counted... But do you truly believe there are as many boys here as there once was?” Will admitted carefully.

All eyes flitted about the crowd; some murmured in agreement, others laughed. He watched Will crumpled in on himself and felt bile rise in his stomach. As his eyes wandered, he couldn’t help but think more logs had once been filled. Frederick bolted towards Will and took the conch from his hands.

“You can’t believe it! Really? You can’t believe there is a monster... Monsters aren’t real!”

Hannibal took no time in laying his claim of the conversation. His mere presence was all the permission he needed to speak. The gaze that Hannibal shot in Frederick's direction stopped him pressing on; finally, he seemed to understand the power of the conch was diminishing.

"What good have your rules done here, Jack? Will is right, there are bodies missing from our numbers."

"The rules are all we've got."

"They are going to do nothing against a beast, we must fight it."

He hollered again, bringing back that sickening chant from before only changed slightly now:

Kill the beast. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.

"You should go on being chief, Jack," Will whispered, only audible to the two of them amidst the growing rabble.

"Why did you speak of the monster like that? Why couldn't you have said it wasn't real?"

"I don't lie..." Will sighed. "Whatever Hannibal thinks he needs to do, he will do it."

Jack didn't ask him what he meant.

A screech brought Jack's attention away from his pitiful musings and back to the abysmal present. A boy rushed down the beach toward them – panting, red-faced, hard-pressed not to trip and splatter.

"Saw it - I saw it! The beast, not a snake – A bird? A bat? – I –It was horrid."

As soon as he reached Jack's feet, he let himself flop against the sand, taking hot, heavy breaths. A crowd took no time to gather around the possessed boy. At Hannibal's approach, the crowd parted and he knelt to the boy, a gentle hand held out in comfort.

"Anthony, what did you see?"

"A wretched, bloody beast – all mangled and *wrong*," The boy's hysteria was calming, but he still sounded petrified.

"We must hunt the beasts on this island – Get rid of them for good. This is our island."

"Hannibal," Jack warned, stepping forward to reassert his authority.

"This is a hunter's job, Jack. I am the hunter," There was no ounce of suggestion in his voice; only righteous fact.

"Well... We need a tracker too. Will?" And Will came as he was summoned.

He wanted to add more, he wanted to say that still, the most important thing was to find a way home. To keep the fire and the smoke. Because he was beginning to wonder whether Hannibal agreed. All he seemed to care about was showing himself as the true leader; but it wasn't to impress Jack, it was far from it. So to whom was he puffing his chest?

The three had headed up the way; Will led them to a cave and was now tentatively combing it for clues of the beast's presence.

"I worry for him, Jack. He feels all the fear of the little ones, as well as his own."

Jack met Hannibal's eyes and felt understanding, compassion. He was a stupid, egotistical boy, but perhaps he was not all bad. Leaders had to make tough decisions, after all.

"We need to rid the island of the beast before the fear contaminates us all."

Jack nodded at that. Both the boys watched Will work; hair matted, dark sunken bags under his eyes, fear had made his already-thin form even more so. Behind them, the other boys had started messing. Giggling as they threw stones and played tag. How could they forget? How could they be in this place and laugh while they were dying? How could they laugh when their mothers had an empty space at the dinner table? Jack turned to them and unleashed his fury.

"There is something killing us," Jack barked. "How can you joke when people are missing? Someone go and tend the fire, and the rest of you go out and look for the beast. Or go to goddamn bed!"

As guilty, angry eyes slowly filtered out, Hannibal placed a firm hand on Jack's shoulders. Reassurance that he had done the right thing. Will's form hung low and defeated as he stalked back towards them.

"It - It doesn't live here. There are no tracks or droppings or... Remains."

"What about the top of the mountain?" Hannibal suggested.

"If something was happening here, you'd tell me right, Will?" Jack asked, attempting not to interrogate the younger boy.

Will's eyes wandered, landing on a part of Jack's face that was not quite his eyes. They were alone; there had been no use to them all climbing the treacherous face to the top so Hannibal had offered to go first and assess.

Will merely nodded. It did not appease Jack, but he was coming to understand that he did not understand Will at all. Then with panting breath and reckless movements, Hannibal was coming back down the mountain.

“Did you see... something, Hannibal?” Jack’s words were slow, not wanting the answer to his question.

“I -,” Hannibal nodded furiously. “Just as Anthony described it. A twisted winged *thing* ... If you wish to confirm the sight, it was to the North.”

Jack shook his head; he could not think of anything worse than seeing it for himself. The three turned on their heels; a meeting needed to be called.

The words came from nowhere and stung Jack as they left Hannibal’s mouth.

“I do not believe Jack a suitable leader. He has been a coward – You *need* someone willing to protect you.”

He was so incredulous he didn’t even know what to say.

“I would suggest another vote, but the time has passed,” Hannibal spoke to the crowd, for all he cared Jack could not be there at all. “I am leaving and whoever wants to join us hunters is welcome to.”

The betrayal stung and ripped at Jack’s heart. He had been nothing but honest, had done nothing but his best, and this was how Hannibal chose to repay him? As the group strode down the beach, Jack did not attempt to stop them.

“We can still make the fire, Jack,” Will soothed.

He was right. If they made the fire and signaled to someone, this would all be over. No more worries of petty squabbles or childish competition. Jack had grown sick and tired of this wretched place.

The remaining members did not stray far; it was too dark, too easy to get lost. As Jack picked up bundles of sticks, he attempted to recollect the taste of his Mom’s sweet potato pie. After a while, they gave up on their fire-building plans for the night and tried to sleep.

It had been easy for Will to slip away; no one listened at this hour; too scared of what they might hear. His special little spot was different when darkness found it. He was closer to invisible. He liked it. The birds and bugs slept now, but he could not. Even if he wanted to, a

familiar humming and the growing stomp of feet occupied his every thought. As he peeped between the foliage, he watched with a heavy heart.

A little pig running; no chance of escape. Spears surrounding it from every side, descending to strike. The squeals were blood-curdling. Something he would never forget.

Then they were done; replaced by mad panting and tearing flesh. His eyes could not tear away as the leader took out his pocket knife and hacked wildly at the pink flesh of its neck. No letting up until the head came away from the ragged body. Three boys took the body out of sight and then the head was hauled up on a spike. *A gift for the beast*.

As the hunters ran off, Will realized he could not move. His vision was transfixed upon the head. Blood seemed to pour from every orifice making the head turn blacker and blacker still. Only when thorny branches cut at his cheeks did he notice that he was leaning toward it. And then, without moving its dead mouth, The Beast began to speak.

You know that you cannot escape.

So why do you bother?

The Beast is not something you can kill. The Beast is already inside of you.

Do you want to take it home? Do you want to kill them all?

Jack had not wanted to come – he had followed the others. Followed their need for meat, their need for fun, their need for hunting. Hannibal had made sure of it that he was the better option. The only option.

To make sure nothing happens; Jack told himself that was the only reason he had come.

Jack had taken the meat and eaten it; the last little bit of respect he could offer Hannibal. The boy who was now King. Jack had been elected, Jack had written the rules, Jack had done all he could to be fair and Hannibal did not care. Hannibal could not care less. Chiefdom had been his to take. And suddenly the boys amongst him were his tribesman, his soldiers, not little boys, not children.

“Jack,” Frederick whispered. “He will not listen; we can just leave. Go back to the camp, to the conch.”

The blasted conch had never done anything for them. He wanted to smash it. He wanted to smash it over Hannibal’s head and knock some sense into him. As if to mirror Jack’s mood, a loud, tumultuous clap of thunder split through the air. It spurred Jack on to bite one last time.

“You have made no shelters, Hannibal, how will you cope when it pours?”

“We already know what we must do. And so do you,” Hannibal stood, thrusting a spear into Jack’s hands before moving towards the fire. He drew them back into their manic dance; away from Jack and away from sanity or reason. The chant pierced the decaying air.

Kill the beast. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.

You are so weak. Why would you come here all alone?

The boys already know what you are.

Even Jack.

Especially Hannibal.

They already know you are crazy; this will only make it worse.

But you’ve realized now, haven’t you? You remember what you have seen.

The Beast was not just a beast, not a physical thing at all. It was in the air they breathed, the heat clinging to their skin, every rush of the waves up the shore. And it was a part of them now – or some of them, at least – Will knew it was in him. He knew it was in Hannibal. No... Hannibal was *made from it*. There was no escaping.

You want to be like the others, like Jack, but you never will be. You aren't like him; you’re like Hannibal.

Only as he passed out did he realize it spoke with Hannibal’s voice.

Blood had spilled from his nose and dried uncomfortably across his face, pulling the dry skin taut. He and the head now matched in their disheveled state.

“What am I to do next?” Will implored.

The mass of quickly decaying flesh gave him no reply. It was time to leave; he could not bear the thought of its voice again.

The darkness had not subsided; the hour was unclear. In his hurry to get away, he realized he had become lost amongst the trees. The colors all gone now, gray upon gray.

And black – blood in the moonlight.

A contorted thing stood before him; hunkered to the tree with vines and ropes. A body. Bodies. Arms spanned out like the wings of the wretched insects that cursed this place. Will

had been here before; he had been trying to find his little spot when he stumbled upon it.

He remembered.

The Beast and his work.

The pocket knife carved at flesh and strong arms worked to manipulate the corpses. A twig beneath his foot had snapped; he had only waited as The Beast turned towards him. The smile of a shark, all teeth and grit, faced him, and his whole body lurched with sickness as he felt his own cheeks grow into a smile at the sight.

Every night since, he had come to this spot. Come to see what delightful cruelty he was intended to witness. There were two Beasts here, and he was one of them. Twigs snapped from behind; he stood to meet the one who had so foolishly snapped them. Finally, he could show someone what he had seen.

Kill the beast. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.

There was an undeniable frenzy working up between the boys as they chanted and danced around the fire. Even Jack could feel it infecting him now.

Then the beast appeared from the brush. Hollering, wailing, screeching.

Its arms moved wildly as he darted into the crowd.

The dance shifted; all the power in their spearing arms.

The dark shadow was quick to drop. In the light of the fire, his body was distinctly pink and red. Then the chanting stopped; the fire crackled amidst the silence. Realization dawning as slowly as the blood trickled from the boy's ruptured skin.

They were all boys again. And they all saw what they had done.

Jack's eyes darted to the thicket behind him; wide-eyed and pale, Will walked out. A ghost drifting by. Making no acknowledgment of him, Jack watched as Will drew towards Hannibal. They shared words besides the fire that Jack did not wish to hear.

All the boys moved away; scattering from what they had done. Jack refused to comprehend what Will might have done; leaving before he had to witness anything else.

"Give me the glasses, Frederick. What use do you have for them now?" Hannibal's tone never raised.

Jack barrelled towards Hannibal, knocking him for six as they scuffled in the dirt. Hannibal had fought before, but so had Jack. What Jack lacked in skill he made up for in sheer bloody force.

“They aren’t here – I don’t have them,” Frederick emerged from his hut.

The frantic ministrations stop.

The two bloodied faces look at each other. Both seem to consider the same possibility.

“Hannibal, where is Will?”

“Did he not leave with you, Jack?”

Something strange, human, passed between their worried eyes – dread. Picking each other up from the ground, it felt like final they had found their vested interest.

The last thing Jack saw was the blunt of a rock as Hannibal struck him.

At the first sign of smoke, Hannibal had begun his ascent. Leaving behind the hunters to guard the traitors.

Will had taken the glasses. Started the fire.

And boy was it glorious.

Not only the fire sat atop the mountain. A beautiful work of twisted forms – but this was not one of Hannibal’s designs. The pig they had slain by the fire was now transformed to a beast of Will’s own making. Dreadful spears tore through the flesh; the event memorialized.

“Randall,” Hannibal named the pig and informed Will of his presence.

“I showed him what you showed me. And he ran.”

A smirk fell about Hannibal’s face; quickly dropping as Will lunged towards him. Will took all precautions to keep the upper hand. He swung blindly, hits connecting painfully despite how erratic they were. Nothing stopped Will now.

“We are just alike – I remember everything you did Hannibal, what you let me see.”

“And what of you, Will? Who are you now you have shared this with me?”

“We are one,” Will grabbed a stick and drove it into Hannibal’s chest. “A shared curse that won’t leave this island.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed; eyes widening in revelation. Will wasn’t leaving Hannibal here alone. It was *their island*.

All fight went from them; their hands let up their painful grip. Both sat up on their knees, bloody foreheads pressed together. Fingers intertwined; all they could do was watch as the smoke poured past the gift Will had left for Hannibal.

They laid down on the hard rock.

Two small wounded boys.

Jack awoke to a new voice. A man. An adult.

His eyes flew open. Before him stood an officer; along the beach a small boat waited.

For a moment all that Jack let joy and relief.

Then he remembered.

He looked to the mountain above; the pluming smoke.

“Is this all of you?” The officer asked, guiding him onto the boat.

Jack only nodded his head. It was over. It was all over.

He imagined holding his mother’s hands with these wretched, guilty hands; he no longer deserved her gentle touch. He looked back to the island; to all that was and that could have been and he knows he has failed.

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this! I am not entirely sure why I found inspiration from a book I haven't read since school, but as I researched for writing the parallels became more apparent! Hopefully, even if you haven't read the LotF it still makes sense as a standalone.

Feel free to leave kudos! Thank you for reading!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!